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The new Asian cuisine

Windsor's Chinois modernizes Chinese dishes with 21st-century accent, features stellar wine list



Press Democrat / Jeff Kan Lee

At Chinois Asian Bistro in Windsor, the food brings sophisticated style to the home cooking and street foods of old Asian cities such as Shanghai, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, among others.

By JEFF COX FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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While most of us still think of our Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai and other Asian restaurants in terms of their classic -- some would say outmoded -- dishes, a culinary revolution has been under way in Asia in recent years.

The changes reflect the striking transitions happening in Asian societies, with the economic explosion in China being the most dramatic. Supermarkets now provide 60 percent of the food across Asia, up from just 10 to 20 percent in 1990. Per capita consumption of grains like rice is down; of meat and milk, way up, according to www.asianfood.org.

The New Asian Cuisine, as the modern re-do of traditional dishes is called, retains some of the features of the old food culture, but updates them in creative, delicious and pan-Asian ways.

If you'd like to try some of this cooking, hie up to Chinois Asian Bistro in Windsor. The food there brings sophisticated style to the home cooking and street foods of old Asian cities. Shanghai, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, among others, are now glamorous and ultramodern, and their culinary arts have followed suit.

A trio of Sonoma County restaurateurs created Chinois to bring us fine examples of the trend, using as much fresh, local produce as possible. Debbie Shu, a graduate of the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, co-owns the place along with her sister Kelly Shu and Chef Chang Liow. The Shu sisters grew up in Taiwan and Liow hails from the Chinese community in Singapore. All three come from families of chefs and restaurant owners, which gives their inventive dishes roots in the best of the past. Kelly Shu and Liow also own Ume, the popular sushi restaurant just a few blocks away.

Perhaps the dish that best exemplifies how modern Asian cuisine treats its traditional ingredients with a gourmet sensibility is the Steamed Alaskan Cod (\$16). The chunk of filet is seared, then placed in a parchment envelope with sliced shiitakes (note to whomever creates the menu: you've misspelled shitake throughout) and a white wine-based sauce. The envelope fills with steam and becomes puffy. The white fish keeps its sturdy texture while retaining its moisture. The mushrooms and wine sauce enhance the mild flavor of the fish without overpowering it.

Another example is the Wagyu Beef with Chinese Basil (\$22 1/2). Typically, Asian restaurants serve beef in chewy, overdone, thin strips of flank steak. The beef in this scrumptious dish is sirloin chunks of wagyu beef -- from the wagyu breed of Japanese cattle raised in Virginia. Wagyu beef is finely marbled and among the most flavorful, tender and juiciest in the world, fetching from \$40 up to \$150 a pound. It also has a better ratio of unsaturated to saturated fats than regular beef. Chinese basil is neither Chinese nor basil. It is an herb the Japanese call shiso and Americans call red perilla and has something of the incense-and-peppermint quality of basil, but different. The beef chunks mingle with onions, greens and radicchio in

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a rich, beefy sauce.

While the food is a revelation, maybe the most surprising aspect of Chinois is the wine list. Liow has for several years run a business exporting wines from high-end wineries like Viader, Staglin Family, Whitehall Lane, Darioush and Robert Sinskey to Singapore, and he is also a sommelier of note. He's stocked Chinois' glassed-in wine cellar with some pretty amazing bottles -- more along the lines of wines you'd expect to find in an international hotel than a restaurant in Windsor. There are moderately priced bottles, of course, but how about these rare wines and their rarified prices: 2004 Rochioli "West Block" Pinot Noir, \$275; 2001 Vogue Chambolle Musigny, \$320; 2005 Pax "Majik Vineyards" Syrah, \$200; 2002 Omellaia, Bolgheri, \$354. You get the idea.

Usually beer is a good choice with Asian dishes, but these reworked recipes seem to ask for a wine accompaniment, and that includes the appetizers (or "small plates," as this and many menus these days call them).

If you're eating lightly, go for the Chinois Green Salad (\$6), at this time of year made with organic field greens, fuyu persimmons (the kind that are edible when still hard), and Asian pear slices, topped with the crispy rice noodles known as mai fun. A mixture of toasted sesame oil, pureed sesame seeds, ponzu sauce, lemongrass and grilled ginger dresses the salad, which explodes with flavor.

If you visit Singapore, you'll find all kinds of shops selling Roti Prata (\$6), bits of folded flatbread, either crispy or fluffy depending on where you buy it, and served with curry on the side, or, in recent years, with onions or garlic. And you'll find it at Chinois as a satisfying appetizer with paste-like yellow curry on the side. It's yummy, and I've not seen it elsewhere in this region.

Another appetizer that is most likely street food in Taiwan is the Taiwanese Beef Skewers (3 for \$8.50 $\frac{1}{2}$). These flavor-packed skewers are fitted with strips of beef marinated in an intensely spicy sauce and served with scallions, red onion and cucumber. Wish they sold these on the streets of Santa Rosa. Panko Prawns (8 for \$10) may or may not be street food, but they sure are good. The crunchy crust and an accompanying wasabi mayonnaise are the features.

A few dim sum items are on the menu. The steamer used on the Steamed Pork Buns (2 for \$5 $\frac{1}{2}$) for some reason gave the doughy buns the metallic aroma of a steam iron -- an interesting smell when ironing a shirt, but not particularly pleasurable when eating a pork bun. The meager filling was standard, red-sauced shredded pork.

In Singapore, where the Chinese and Malaysian peoples make up the Peranakan cultural mix, there's a wonderful noodle soup called Nyonya Laksa (with seafood \$16, with chicken and fried tofu, \$13). Laksa are the noodles, nyonya refers to the coconut-spicy gravy. It's served all around Southeast Asia as bowls of fast food, either laced with seafood or chicken, and usually containing fried tofu. The sauce gives you hints of spices like galangal, coconut and lime. The chicken has been marinated and looks more like beef than fowl. The noodles are rice noodles, and the flavor is wonderful.

Dinner finished with Persimmon Crème Brûlée (\$6 $\frac{1}{2}$), with soft, sweet, jellylike persimmon mixed with the custard and topped with a thin sugar skin that's melted with a torch and cools into a crunchy crust.

To sum up: Chinois serves up-to-the-minute dishes that bring the best of modern Asia to Sonoma County. It's a welcome addition to Wine Country's culinary scene.

Jeff Cox writes a weekly restaurant review column for A&E. You can reach him at jeffcox@sonic.net.

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